
THE
Splendid Art
OF
OPERA

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THE
Splendid Art
OF
OPERA

ALSO BY ETHAN MORDDEN

*Better Foot Forward: The History of American
Musical Theatre (1976)*

Opera in the Twentieth Century: Sacred, Profane, Godot (1978)

*That Jazz!: An Idiosyncratic Social History of the
American Twenties (1978)*

*A Guide to Orchestral Music: The Handbook for
Non-Musicians (1980)*

THE
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A CONCISE HISTORY BY
Ethan Mordden



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Preface

THIS IS A CONCISE BUT COMPREHENSIVE HISTORY DESIGNED FOR THE nonexpert. I have tried to cover all the major events in the history of opera, and some colorful minor ones, taking in not only composition but changing production styles and the various cults of personality. I have also tried to reveal the conduits of form without dwelling too much on the clichés that everyone learns early in an operagoing career, so that the story will be informative but enjoyable rather than academic.

Because opera is a combination of at least two arts, theatre and song, it has a built-in conflict that most other arts don't have: which of the two is more strategic? I see opera's history as a ceaseless tug of war between the two. In some eras, either "good theatre" or "good music" takes precedence; in other eras, the two generate separate forms that confront and borrow from each other. That tug of war provides the book's perspective. Aesthetic revolution, sociopolitical influences, vogue, technical innovation, show-biz tactics, huzzahs and hisses, and George Frideric Handel's attempted defenestration of the imperious singer Francesca Cuzzoni provide the fun.

The spelling of Russian names and titles represents a phonography of the Russian sounds, not the halfhearted system normally seen in Roman letters. On the other hand, sometimes a dedicated system confuses more than it educates, and while all works are cited in their original title and (where appropriate) also in English translation (e.g., *Die Zauberflöte*; *The Magic Flute*), I have used the original and the translation interchangeably thereafter, to reflect common operaphile usage. Similarly, characters turn up both in their authentic opera names (*Didone*) and in English renderings (*Dido*). Why not be comfortable as well as exact? Parenthetical dates refer to the year of performance, not necessarily of composition; and please use the glossary at the back of the book when trapped in terminology.

—ETHAN MORDDEN